

# ED304024 1988-12-00 Proficiency Testing in the Less Commonly Taught Languages. ERIC Digest.

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## Proficiency Testing in the Less Commonly Taught Languages. ERIC Digest.

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This "Digest" assumes that the reader is familiar with the general principles underlying language proficiency assessment. A description of the development of the guidelines, which have been the basis for much of the recent work in foreign language teaching and assessment, is provided in P. Lowe, Jr. & J.E. Liskin-Gasparro, "Testing Speaking Proficiency: The Oral Interview. ERIC: Q & A." This "Digest" is based on the chapter, "Issues Concerning the Less Commonly Taught Languages," written by I. Thompson, R.T. Thompson, and D. Hiple, in the ERIC/CLL Language in Education series monograph, "Second Language Proficiency Assessment: Current Issues," edited by P. Lowe, Jr. & C.W. Stansfield. The monograph is available from Prentice Hall Regents, Mail Order Processing, 200 Old Tappan Road, Old Tappan, NJ 07675, or by calling 1-201-767-5937.

## GENERIC GUIDELINES AND THE LCTLs

The guidelines for language proficiency assessment have their roots in the efforts of the U.S. Government's language training community. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the Educational Testing Service spearheaded the movement to adapt the government Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) proficiency descriptions and guidelines for use in foreign language programs in colleges and universities. Since 1981, non-language-specific guidelines have been published and revised periodically, and are now being assimilated into many foreign language programs to serve as a foundation for the development of revised curricula.

Much of the early work in developing the guidelines was based on Spanish, French, and German. As the circle widened to include languages such as Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic, it quickly became apparent that the original guidelines were too Eurocentric. The two most obvious problems were: (1) a bias toward grammatical categories of western European languages, such as tense and gender; and (2) the concern that learners would require much time to master the principles and mechanics of non-Roman writing systems.

Efforts to expand the ACTFL guidelines to accommodate the less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) began with the development of guidelines for Chinese, Japanese, and Russian, and with the training of testers for these languages. Tester training for Arabic and Portuguese followed soon thereafter. Workshops and familiarization projects were expanded to include teachers of Hindi, Indonesian, and some African languages.

## ADAPTING THE GUIDELINES TO FIT SPECIFIC LCTLs

To apply the generic guidelines to the construction of proficiency descriptions for a particular language, the target language itself must be carefully assessed. Factors such

as cultural context, appropriate content, and what constitutes accuracy must be taken into account for each language. Theoretical problems in adapting the generic guidelines to a particular language include complex morphologies in Russian, diglossia in Arabic, the early appearance of register in Indonesian and Japanese, and the presence of Hindi-English code-switching at high levels of proficiency among educated native Hindi speakers. The nature of writing systems such as those used in Chinese and Japanese also presents a special challenge to the development of guidelines because the length of training required to learn these languages is greater than that required to learn Spanish or French.

Teachers of Arabic, for example, are now discussing ways in which various dialects of Arabic can be accommodated when testing for proficiency. The generic guidelines were developed to test a full range of oral proficiency, including informal conversation which, in Arabic, is generally conducted in the local dialect. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), the language of the print and, to a considerable degree, of the broadcast media, is also widely used in more formal and international settings, although the extent to which native speakers will be prepared to switch registers varies considerably from one dialect to another. The general consensus at present is to seek a compromise while further study of the problems in developing guidelines for Arabic continues. Thus, when testing for proficiency in Arabic, tester and candidate replicate the situation in the Arab world itself by identifying through the interview process the common language base through which they can communicate. Testers will accept responses in MSA and/or any colloquial dialect with which they are familiar. Because an ability to communicate in both MSA and a dialect is characteristic of native speakers, proficiency in both MSA and a colloquial variety is required to achieve a "Superior" rating in Arabic.

Another practical consideration is how to handle a language's sociolinguistic peculiarities when developing language-specific proficiency guidelines. For example, Indonesian requires immediate recognition of strict rules that govern appropriate style when addressing others. Hence, forms of address are taught from the very beginning in Indonesian courses, and the guidelines for Indonesian must reflect this and other necessary sociolinguistic rules that define human relationships and status peculiar to Indonesian society.

## TRAINING LANGUAGE-SPECIFIC TESTERS

Because language-specific tester training currently exists in only a handful of the LCTLs, it is likely that most initial training will be mediated through English or through another language known to the prospective tester, e.g. training through English or French for Asian and African specialists. Training might also be carried out in a language that is structurally similar to the target language, e.g. training through Russian in order to test in another Slavic language. Another solution is to pair the tester with a native speaker of the target language, and allow the tester to work with the native speaker in a capacity similar to that used in the former linguist/informant method of language instruction. Thus, the trained tester guides the informant through the interview,

and the two make a joint decision as to the final rating. It is also possible that semi-direct tests of oral proficiency will be developed and validated against the oral interview for those much less commonly taught languages for which developing a cadre of trained testers may not be possible in the near future.

## DEVELOPING COMPETENCY-BASED LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

The language training programs funded by the U.S. Department of Education are now required to provide sufficient evidence that they are making changes to include competency-based teaching and appropriate testing in their individual institutions. Programs are already beginning to institute different approaches to the development of language teaching materials and curricula. Proficiency is a major topic of concern at summer institutes. The African language teaching community has developed a set of common goals and priorities, as well as possible avenues of coordination between centers. Semi-direct tests for the LCTLs are beginning to be developed based on the ACTFL guidelines and adapted for specific target languages. The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) has already developed semi-direct tests in Portuguese, Chinese, Hebrew, Indonesian, and Hausa, and the University of Pennsylvania has developed a semi-direct test for Hindi.

## LCTLs AND POLICY QUESTIONS

The appearance of recent legislation and regulations relating to proficiency testing and competency-based language programs has created a new set of policy questions that funding agencies and post-secondary institutions will have to face. The Education Amendments of 1986 included a number of significant changes in Title VI of the Higher Education Act (Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships Program, 1988), which is the legislative basis for several of the international education programs administered by the Center for International Education in the U.S. Department of Education. There will be intense competition for the limited training resources currently available as universities seek to come into compliance with these legislative changes. The U.S. Department of Education, academia, and the major professional foreign language associations will need to cooperate in setting realistic priorities and in developing the necessary guidelines. The most pressing question is one of deciding which languages or language groups are more important and should have guidelines developed first. The second pressing question is how the nearly 150 national resource centers and fellowships programs in foreign languages, area and international studies, funded in part by the U.S. Department of Education under Title VI of the Higher Education Act (Thompson, Thompson, and Hiple, 1988), will meet the requirements of the new legislation.

At the secondary school level, schools are beginning to teach languages other than Spanish, French, and German. Russian, Japanese, Chinese, and in some places Arabic, are now taught in several major urban school systems all over the country. With guidance and encouragement from the professional community, state systems will need

to adopt proficiency assessment procedures in these languages to enable teachers to meet certification requirements. Such areas of foreign language curricula as placement, syllabus design, course and program evaluation, entry and exit requirements, and required proficiency levels of teaching assistants and teachers will also change as a result of the language-specific proficiency tests (Byrnes, 1987).

## THE RESEARCH AGENDA

For the moment, the application of the generic guidelines to the LCTLs has raised questions that offer opportunities for new research in the field of foreign language acquisition and learning. A number of scholars involved in the field of second language acquisition and testing have suggested such areas of possible research as: the maximum level of proficiency that can be reached under certain conditions; the variables that affect learning; the relationship between second language (L2) acquisition and L2 instruction; and the effect of formal vs. informal learning. Such research calls for interdisciplinary cooperation and training.

At the testing level, researchers are calling attention to issues in the area of interrater reliability. Examples of these issues are: interrater reliability across languages; reliability between government- and ACTFL-certified oral proficiency testers; examination of differences between native and nonnative interviewers with regard to both elicitation procedures and rating; and maintenance of rater reliability over time.

Most importantly, the establishment of generic guidelines and the subsequent evolution of the proficiency movement provide research opportunities by giving LCTL practitioners a framework within which second language acquisition can be observed and evaluated. This research can be applied to both oral proficiency and the acquisition of receptive skills.

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